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ABSTRACT

After Britain returned control of Hong Kong to China in July 1997, a new language policy required all schools to switch their teaching medium from English to Chinese in September 1998. Those schools that wanted to continue to teach in English had to obtain special permission. Only 100 of 400 schools successfully obtained such permission. This clash over the language of instruction sparked heated debate in Hong Kong. This paper looks at this new language policy from two major sociological perspectives: structural functionalism and conflict theory. First, from the structuralist-functionalist perspective, it is argued that mother-tongue education (using Chinese) should be promoted in all schools because it can improve students' academic performance and interest. Second, from the conflict theory perspective, it is argued that the decision to allow 100 schools to keep teaching in English would perpetuate social inequality in Hong Kong society. It is concluded, therefore, that all secondary education in Hong Kong should be conducted in Chinese. (Contains 18 references.) (KFT)

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Two Sociological Perspectives on the New Language Policy in Hong Kong

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Introduction

After 156 years of British colonial rule, Hong Kong reverted to China in July 1997. Perhaps one of the most controversial issues during the hand-over was the new language policy. The new language policy required all secondary schools to switch their teaching medium from English to Chinese in September 1998, the first academic year after the return of sovereignty to China. Those schools that wanted to continue to use English as the language of instruction had to appeal to the Hong Kong Education Department. Permission would be granted to a school under two conditions: 1) 85 percent of the students were able to demonstrate enough skills to handle English lessons; and 2) the teachers must be certified as competent to teach English. After assessments and evaluations, only 100 schools were allowed to continue to use English as the medium of instruction. The other 300 secondary schools, like it or not, had to use Chinese as the main teaching medium.

The new language policy has unleashed criticism and sparked an educational debate in Hong Kong. Most parents, much of the business sector, and some schools have opposed the change, fearing that the switch will cause a decline in English proficiency in Hong Kong. Many also criticized the new language policy for being divisive, arguing that if mother-tongue teaching is more effective, then all schools should be required to teach in Chinese so that no particular schools would have an "unfair" advantage over others.

In this paper, we will look at the new language policy from two major sociological perspectives: structural-functionalism and conflict theory. First, we will argue from a structuralist-functionalist perspective that mother-tongue education, or using Chinese as the language of instruction, should be promoted in all secondary schools because it can improve students' academic performance and interest. The second key point of this paper, drawn from conflict theory, is that the policy of allowing 100 schools to continue to use English would perpetuate social inequality in Hong Kong society. Before defining and applying these sociological perspectives, however, we first give a brief history of the language-of-instruction controversy in Hong Kong.

Historical Background and Current Issues

In Hong Kong, there are two main types of secondary schools in terms of the teaching medium: the Chinese Middle school and the Anglo-Chinese school. Chinese middle schools use Chinese to teach all subjects except English and English literature. Anglo-Chinese schools use English to instruct in all subjects except Chinese language, Chinese history and Chinese literature.

People in Hong Kong tend to stereotype Chinese schools as "second class" and students attending Chinese middle schools are perceived as academically inferior to their counterparts in English schools. English schools are often associated with the transition to higher education, good job opportunities, the elite class, and social mobility. On the other hand, Chinese schools have few positive associations. In view of these contrasting conceptions and functions, it is

understandable that a school bearing the title of "English school" evokes a much different meaning for parents, employers, and students than a school bearing the title of "Chinese school."

Before the hand-over of Hong Kong to Mainland China, 350 of the 400 secondary schools in Hong Kong were English-medium schools. Although Chinese-medium schools were often perceived as second-class schools, prior to the 1960s Chinese schools nevertheless enjoyed a more prestigious status. Yau (1989) stated, "In the face of the fierce competition from English schools, Chinese medium education had been able to hold its own for nearly a hundred years. In fact, it was only in the latter half of this century that English medium education began to catch on" (p. 281).

Ever since Britain took over Hong Kong in the early 1840s, the British government spent most of its educational resources on English medium schools. Although Chinese medium schools did not receive any subsidies from the colonial government, they did well in enrollment. In 1954 over 40% of the candidates entering the School Certificate Examination were educated in Chinese medium schools (Yau, 1989, p. 281). However, the student enrollment in these Chinese schools has dropped significantly since the early 1960s.

So (1984) suggested two reasons for the dominance of English schools in education in the latter half of the 20th century. First, when the Communist Party came to power in 1949, China gradually adopted a radical policy that severely limited opportunities for higher education in China. The only opportunity for

higher education in China then soon became the English-medium Hong Kong University. In order to gain entrance to and survive in this English medium university, a good command of English was required. As a result, English schools became more attractive than Chinese schools because the language advantages of the former gave students a better chance to enter Hong Kong University.

Employment opportunities also played an important role in favoring English medium schools in Hong Kong. Under colonial rule, proficiency in English was the key to a successful career in the government because English was the language of law, commerce, and administration. Furthermore, in the 1950s, Hong Kong became an international port and business with English speaking countries increased dramatically. In order to trade and do business with these countries, Hong Kong needed to educate people to speak and write English. As a result, the need for English-speaking workers grew substantially.

The current negative images of Chinese schools keep many students and parents away from mother-tongue education. In a 1989 study, Yau concluded that among the students then enrolled in Chinese Middle schools, many would have preferred going to Anglo-Chinese schools if there had been a place for them.

Nevertheless, some schools have tried to switch their medium of instruction from English to Chinese. Despite their best efforts, some of them have failed miserably. The Carmel Secondary School is a salient example. In

1987, the school decided to switch its instructional language from English to Chinese. However, after three years of experimentation, the school switched back to English for the following reasons:

1. After the school announced its new language policy, it no longer could attract as many good students as it had before. The drop of the quality of students had a demoralizing effect on teachers.

2. Pressure from parents was another main factor for the failure. Most parents opposed the switch, believing that the new system could not help their children compete with others in the future.

3. Even teachers feared that their students would not be able to catch up with others once the students switched to other English schools and tertiary education.

David Cheung, the principal of Carmel Secondary School, an advocate of mother-tongue education, eventually resigned (Leung, 1998).

Because most students and their parents prefer English schools, Chinese Middle schools are only their "default" choice. As a result, Chinese medium schools have to accept the fact that most students who come to their schools are of much lower academic caliber. Although many school principals realize that using Chinese as the teaching medium could be good for students, they also fear that once they switch the instruction language to Chinese, they will not be able to attract students of the same quality. The 9-year compulsory education review committee interviewed 21 principals, and 12 expressed the fear that the adoption of Chinese medium education would adversely affect the standard and image of their schools (cited in Yau 1989, p.293).

In order to minimize such fears, the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union (HKPTU) conducted a survey in July 1993. The schools were asked whether they would be willing to change to mother tongue education if such a change would not affect their competitiveness and if all the schools were going to switch their medium of instruction at the same time. Of the schools surveyed, 210 (approximately 50%) indicated that they would support such change. However when the HKPTU initiated a "Mother Tongue Charter" in which school sponsoring bodies were asked to sign it as a pledge in support of mother-tongue education in 1996, the response rates were extremely low. According to Au Pak-kuen, Vice-president of HKPTU, "only 29 schools out of 210 signed the 'Mother Tongue Charter'" (Personal Interview, 1998). As one principal stated, "Many schools only paid lip-service to mother tongue education and not many schools really want to take the lead because of the Carmel Secondary School's effect. It is quite a sad thing" (Personal Interview, 1998).

This widely held belief that Chinese schools are inferior to English is deeply ingrained in the psyche of many citizens of Hong Kong. The policy of allowing 100 schools to continue to use English again has reinforced this belief. The action has made parents and educators wonder whether the Hong Kong government really believes in mother-tongue education. Union vice-president Au Pak-kuen put it well: "Why should we restrict its application to a certain batch of schools if the use of the mother tongue is proved to facilitate effective learning?" (Gopinath, S & Keung, M, 1997). The implication here is clearly that

certain schools should not be allowed to seek exemption from mother-tongue ruling.

With the introduction of the historical background of and current issues of the new language policy in Hong Kong, we now will analyze this policy from two different perspectives, namely, functionalism and conflict theory.

The Structural-functionalist perspective

Functional theorists tend to focus their research on questions concerning the structure and functioning of organizations (Ballentine, 1997, p. 8). They view schools and society as interconnected and interdependent systems. By this analysis education performs two vital functions in modern society. First, schooling is an effective mechanism to sort and select the best and the most talented in the society to fill the most responsible (and usually the most remunerative) positions in government, business, and education. In a truly meritocratic society, a person's status depends much more on his or her effort or talents than family background and it is schooling that allows these distinctions to be made in rational way. Schooling should thus help a society distribute social goods based on merit rather than inherited status. Furthermore, by a structural-functionalist view, the most effective schools are those that teach students the kinds of cognitive skills that are essential to fit into our increasingly knowledge-dependent society. As such structural-functionalism is basically conservative.

From the functionalist viewpoint, mother tongue education serves two vital functions for the individual and for the society. First, it will improve

cognitive skills and academic performance for the majority of students. Second, Chinese is the national language of Hong Kong and China. Thus, the close economic and political ties between Hong Kong and China in recent years make the use of the Chinese language increasingly important.

As mentioned previously, before the hand-over approximately 90% of the secondary schools claimed that their schools were English-medium schools. However, in reality, most of these so-called English-medium schools were using a mixture of English and Chinese. While textbooks and examinations were in English, most of the lectures were given in Cantonese or Chinglish (a mixture of Cantonese and English). This practice is not conducive to developing students' cognitive skills (Education Department, Hong Kong, 1994; Lo, 1991; Yu & Atkinson, 1988). Using English to teach Hong Kong students from the age of 12 or 13 clearly has an adverse effect on cognitive development (cited in Lau, 1995, p. 106).

Various researchers (Education Department, 1994; Siu et al. 1979; Yu & Atkinson, 1988) have shown that students learn better through their mother tongue. According to these studies, some of the educational benefits of mother-tongue teaching are that:

- Most students prefer learning in the mother tongue;
- Students learning in the mother tongue generally perform better academically than their counterparts using English as medium of instruction (MOI); and
- Students of traditional Chinese-medium schools consistently achieve a higher pass percentage than the territory-wide average in both

> Chinese Language and English Language in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination. This shows the positive impact of mother-tongue teaching on the learning of Chinese and English as a subject
>
> (Education commission report No. 4).

In addition to these educational reasons, cultural factors also indicate the social functionality of mother-tongue teaching. In his 1982 report, Llewellyn stated that the mother-tongue education should be emphasized in all schools because "language reflects the soul and culture of a people. Each language has its own images, proverbs, sense of humor and different thought structures expressing various facets of civilization" (p. 25). Kwok agreed that "to preserve the tradition and dignity of Chinese culture, it is necessary to save the deteriorating Chinese education in Hong Kong" (cited in Lee, 1993, p.209).

Furthermore, the growing economic links between Hong Kong and China make mother-tongue education compelling. Lam Wu Kong, the former Director of the Hong Kong Education Department, stated, "I hope parents will understand that knowing English is not enough. Chinese is as important as English in the near future because of the economical and political impact of China. If students do not know Chinese, [they] will lose out a lot of opportunities" (Singtao, 1998).

Lau (1995) seconded this view by saying, "In recent years, employers in Hong Kong have hired more and more Mainland Chinese graduates who have been educated in the West. What makes these Chinese graduates most valuable

is that apart from having a good command of English, they speak excellent Putonghua and write perfect Chinese—two skills with which Hong Kong's 'English education' has failed to equip its Chinese population" (p. 121).

Opponents of mother-tongue education argue that mother-tongue education would lower students' proficiency in English. However, the termination of colonial rule has not reduced the importance of English, which is an international language through which Hong Kong maintains its overseas links as a financial and trading center. This fact guarantees that students will still have substantial exposure to English in their daily lives so that even if Chinese did indeed become the universal medium of instruction in Hong Kong, schools would certainly still maintain robust English programs and courses. Indeed, to maintain English language standards, the Hong Kong government will still have to recruit 700 native English speakers to strengthen the English programs in all Chinese middle schools, even if Chinese is the medium of instruction.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory offers a different interpretation of schooling in relationship to society (McLaren, 1998). Both the functionalist paradigm and the conflict paradigm view schools and society as closely linked. As mentioned previously, the functional theorists see schools as an effective mechanism to select the most talented people in the society and to transmit cognitive skills. According to conflict theory, tensions always exist between the "have's" and the "have-nots" in society. The rich control wealth, power and privileges (such as access to the best

education in the society) while the have-nots remain disempowered because of limited access and inferior resources, particularly involving schooling (Ballentine, 1995, p. 5). The dominant groups thus preserve their power and social status through institutions such as schools. Schooling is thus a primary instrumentality of "serving the interest of elites, as reinforcing existing inequalities, and as producing attitudes that foster acceptance of this status quo" (Hurn, 1993, p. 56).

Like the functionalist perspective, conflict theory also offers insights into the new language policy. From this theoretical vantage point, it is easy to see how the new language policy creates and perpetuates social division. For instance, allowing 100 schools to continue to use English as the medium of instruction has a strong "labeling" effect that perpetuates social stratification. After the Hong Kong government announced the names of these 100 schools, they immediately became the elite schools. Parents rushed to these schools, hoping to secure a seat for their children. On the other hand, those schools that changed their medium of instruction from English to Chinese had a different fate. For example, Lau Kam Lung Secondary School received less than 10 applications the year after becoming a Chinese school, as compared to 300 applications it used to receive prior to the change.

These 100 schools will most likely get the best students from the total pool of secondary-school students and most of them coming, of course, from the high socio-economic status families. For, as a survey conducted by the British Council

demonstrated, there is a strong correlation between English proficiency and socio-economic status in Hong Kong. The higher the family's income, the better the student's English proficiency. Conversely, low-income families have a low English proficiency level.

Gibbons also studied the attitudes of the children of the Chinese elite and the working class and lower-middle class towards English-speaking children. Result showed that the children of the Chinese elite were more willing to interact with other English-speaking children. They also felt that their political and social status was comparable to other English speaking children. On the other hand, children of working and lower middle class felt that they were not as good as English speaking children and they seldom interacted with the English-speaking children. Children of the Chinese elite evidence higher degrees of self confidence (cited in Lee, p. 3).

Clearly, a policy which results in one-fourth of secondary schools using English as the medium of instruction is socially divisive. As Edmond Law has warned,

> [This policy] is divisive because a small proportion of pupils will have access—alarmingly funded by public money—to a cultural capital allowing them an early advantage in life. Divisive, because the division will be institutionalized and legitimatized, and access is limited. Divisive, because the social and cultural distance in an arbitrarily divided population is likely to be enlarged and made more permanent. Divisive, because the remaining schools will have to care for those who fail to enter the English stream, with great damage to their self-esteem. (Law, 1997)

In other words, the new system will clearly continue to perpetuate social inequality in Hong Kong because students with privileged socio-economic backgrounds will have a better chance to get into English schools, which will, in turn, promote their continuing success in their future. The socio-economically marginalized students will have to surmount enormous barriers in such a linguistically weighted school system to gain equivalent success academically and socio-economically. Such a language policy, then, merely, reproduces existing inequalities in the larger political economy (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

Naturally, English language instruction will still continue to play an important role in the curricula of Hong Kong's schools. However English as the main medium of instruction is likely to so dramatically disadvantage many school children that it will have dire effects on social cohesiveness.

Conclusion

Few dispute the fact that mother-tongue education is effective and beneficial for the majority of Hong Kong students. Mother tongue education gives students a better understanding of what is being taught and fosters their interest in their subjects. Furthermore, allowing some schools to continue to operate in English is not appropriate because the action exacerbates class inequalities. The new language policy promoted by the Hong Kong Department of Education, which would allow certain schools to use English as the medium of instruction, is thus not appropriate from either functionalist or conflict theory perspective.

Indeed, the structural-functionalist analysis of the proposal to use Chinese as the primary language of instruction in all schools reveals that this policy would be most effective at the pedagogical level. Furthermore, from the perspective of conflict theory, using Chinese in some schools and English in others would ultimately serve to perpetuate invidious socioeconomic distinctions at the institutional and broader social levels. On the other hand, using Chinese-only would represent a step toward positively addressing those socio-economic inequities. For these reasons, secondary-school education in Hong Kong should be conducted in the mother tongue.

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